INTRODUCTION

Matsui Keishirō had a distinguished diplomatic career which included the posts of Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to France, one of the chief delegates to the Paris Peace Conference, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to Britain, which was his last post. Despite this he has been largely overlooked and there has been no biography or study of him. His autobiography was published by his son thirty-seven years after his death. For students of Japanese diplomatic history he is not known for any major diplomatic achievements. Yet a closer scrutiny reveals that he was very active in the wings, being involved at numerous important turning points in the history of Japanese external relations. He was present at the Japanese Embassy in London, when the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was signed, being deputy to the Minister, Hayashi Tadasu. When the First World War broke out, he was the Vice-Minister under Katō Takaaki. Most of his long diplomatic career, which extended over nearly forty years, was spent overseas.

EARLY CAREER

Matsui was born in Osaka on 5 March 1868. After graduating from the Osaka English School (Osaka eigo gakkō), which was, according to Matsui, ‘the only good school in the Kansai region at the time’, he moved to Tokyo and studied for two years at Daigaku yobimon, the forerunner of the First High School (Dai-ichi kōtō gakkō). He studied English Law at Tokyo Imperial University, graduating in July 1889. Upon his graduation Matsui ‘did not like the idea of becoming a judge or lawyer very much’ and heard that there was a position at the Foreign Ministry. He therefore consulted his international law professor at his university, Hatoyama Kazuo, who also worked in the Foreign Ministry as the
head of the investigation division (torishirabe kyoku). Hatoyama told Matsui to pay a visit to Katō Takaaki, who was at the time Private Secretary to Foreign Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu and the head of the political affairs section (seimu ka). After visiting Katō at his house in Surugadai in Tokyo, Matsui got the job.

He was assigned to the political affairs section but, the Foreign Ministry being such a small-scale operation at that time, he also worked in the translation bureau (honyaku kyoku). The most important issue at the time was Treaty revision. The seriousness of this issue was rammed home three months after Matsui joined the Foreign Ministry. Ōkuma was thought by nationalists to have made too many concessions to foreign powers and an attempt was made to assassinate him. In the bomb blast Ōkuma lost a leg. In December Aoki Shūzō became Foreign Minister. He decided to abandon ‘the multi-national approaches’ and instead to concentrate on negotiating a revised treaty with Britain. The first step was to approach Hugh Fraser, the British Minister in Tokyo, with ‘his personal plans’. According to Matsui, a legal adviser to the ministry drafted the memorandum. Matsui had to translate it into Japanese so that Aoki could present it to the cabinet for its approval.

In those days Matsui was mainly dealing with Korean affairs. In November 1890 he was ordered to go to his first overseas post as the Third Secretary at the Japanese Legation in Seoul. He spent four challenging years in the lead-up to the Sino-Japanese War. He served under no less than six Charges d’Affaires and Ministers in Seoul. The last of these was the genro Inoue Kaoru with whom Matsui maintained a close relationship thereafter. In December 1894, with the war going in Japan’s favour, Matsui was transferred to Washington where the Japanese Minister at the time was Kurino Shinichirō, a Harvard graduate. He left Tokyo in February 1895 and stayed in Washington for three years until the outbreak of the Spanish-American War.

FIRST ASSIGNMENT IN LONDON

Matsui was transferred to London as First Secretary in 1898, arriving there in June that year to replace Hayashi Gonsuke. The Minister was Katō Takaaki. In those days there were only four members of staff under Katō, Matsui being his deputy. On 27 September, the Japanese Legation moved from Sussex Square to 4 Grosvenor Gardens. In the spring of 1899, Katō left London after a dispute with the Foreign Ministry, which wanted Katō to postpone his pre-arranged leave to see through the raising of a public loan on the London money market. The task fell to Matsui as chargé d’affaires. With help from staff sent from the Finance Ministry and the head of the Yokohama Species Bank London office, Matsui successfully organized a consortium of banks and raised 10 million pounds.

At the time, there were two issues concerning Anglo-Japanese relations: immigration and China. Discriminatory immigration laws were being considered in Queensland (in Australia), and British Columbia (Canada). The Japanese government tried to influence the Australian and Canadian governments through London. On China, Matsui was instructed to sound out the reaction of the British government to the US Secretary of State John Hay’s ‘Open Door’ note issued in September 1899. In addition, Matsui had to handle the Boxer Rebellion issue just before handing over the embassy to Hayashi Tadasu, the new minister. Usually Matsui, as he was only a chargé d’affaires, met an Assistant Under-Secretary, Francis Bertie, but on this occasion he was instructed